

## Frequently Asked Questions about Arthritis

### What is arthritis?

We can all feel a bit stiff in the morning. From time to time, we may even feel achy or sore. But with arthritis, a person can feel stiff, achy, or sore all the time. Arthritis means “joint inflammation” and refers to a group of diseases that cause pain, swelling, stiffness, and loss of motion in the *joints* (places in the body where bones meet like elbows, knees, and hips). “Arthritis” is often used as a more general term to refer to the more than 100 rheumatic diseases that may affect the joints but can also cause pain, swelling, and stiffness in other supporting structures of the body such as muscles, tendons, ligaments, bones, and internal organs. Throughout this FAQ the terms “arthritis” and “rheumatic diseases” are sometimes used interchangeably.

The amount of discomfort caused by this disease varies from person to person. Some people can have pain so severe, they have to limit their daily activities. Other people have mild to moderate pain that doesn't limit them much or at all. Sometimes there are periods of time without any pain or discomfort.

Arthritis is a chronic, or life long, disease that has no cure. The good news is that many advances have been made in arthritis research. There are medicines and other treatments for the disease. Getting enough rest and exercise, controlling weight, and keeping a good diet can also help ease symptoms. Other treatments include the use of pain relief methods and assistive devices, such as splints or braces. When arthritis is severe, surgery may be needed

### Are there different types of arthritis?

There are over 100 different types of rheumatic diseases. The most common rheumatic diseases are:

- **Osteoarthritis.** Also called *degenerative joint disease*, this is the most common type of arthritis, which occurs most often in older people. This disease affects *cartilage*, the tissue that cushions and protects the ends of bones in a joint. With osteoarthritis, the cartilage starts to wear away over time. In extreme cases, the cartilage can completely wear away, leaving nothing to protect the bones in a joint, causing bone-on-bone contact. Bones may also bulge, or stick out at the end of a joint, called a *bone spur*.

Osteoarthritis causes joint pain and can limit a person's normal *range of motion* (the ability to freely move and bend a joint). When severe, the joint may lose all movement, causing a person to become disabled. Disability most often happens when the disease affects the spine, knees, and hips.

- **Rheumatoid arthritis.** This is an *autoimmune disease* in which the body's immune system (the body's way of fighting infection) attacks healthy joints, tissues, and organs. Occurring most often in women of childbearing age (15-44), this disease inflames the lining (or *synovium*) of joints. It can cause pain, stiffness, swelling, and loss of function in joints. When severe, rheumatoid arthritis can deform, or change, a joint. For example, the joints in a person's finger can become deformed, causing the finger to bend or curve.

Rheumatoid arthritis affects mostly joints of the hands and feet and tends to be symmetrical. This means the disease affects the same joints on both sides of the body (like both hands or both feet) at the same time and with the same symptoms. No other form of arthritis is symmetrical. About two to three times as many women as men have this disease.

- **Fibromyalgia.** This chronic disorder causes pain throughout the tissues that support and move the bones and joints. Pain, stiffness, and localized tender points occur in the muscles and tendons, particularly those of the neck, spine, shoulders, and hips. Fatigue and sleep disturbances may also occur.
- **Gout.** When a person has gout, they have higher than normal levels of *uric acid* in the blood. The body makes uric acid from many of the foods we eat. Too much uric acid causes deposits, called *uric acid crystals*, to form in the fluid and lining of the joints. The result is an extremely painful attack of arthritis. The most common joint gout affects is the big toe. This disease is more common in men than in women.
- **Infectious arthritis.** Arthritis can be caused by an infection, either bacterial or viral, such as *Lyme disease*. When this disease is caused by bacteria, early treatment with antibiotics can ease symptoms and cure the disease.
- **Reactive arthritis.** This is arthritis that develops after a person has an infection in the urinary tract, bowel, or other organs. People who have this disease often have eye problems, skin rashes, and mouth sores.
- **Psoriatic arthritis.** Some people who have *psoriasis*, a common skin problem that causes scaling and rashes, also have arthritis. This disease often affects the joints at the ends of the fingers and can cause changes in the fingernails and toenails. Sometimes the spine can also be affected.
- **Systemic lupus erythematosus.** Also called *lupus* or *SLE*, this is an *autoimmune disease*. When a person has an autoimmune disease, the immune system attacks itself, killing healthy cells and tissue, rather than doing its job to protect the body from disease and infection. Lupus can inflame and damage a person's joints, skin, kidneys, lungs, blood vessels, heart, and brain. African American women are three times more likely to get lupus than Caucasian women. It is also more common in Hispanic, Asian, and American Indian women.
- **Ankylosing spondylitis.** This disease most often affects the spine, causing pain and stiffness. It can also cause arthritis in the hips, shoulders, and knees. It affects mostly men in their late teenage and early adult years.

- **Juvenile rheumatoid arthritis.** The most common type of arthritis in children, this disease causes pain, stiffness, swelling, and loss of function in the joints. A young person can also have rashes and fevers with this disease.
- **Polymyalgia rheumatica.** Because this disease involves tendons, muscles, ligaments, and tissues around the joint, symptoms often include pain, aching, and morning stiffness in the shoulders, hips, neck, and lower back. It is sometimes the first sign of *giant cell arteritis*, a disease of the arteries characterized by inflammation, weakness, weight loss, and fever.
- **Polymyositis.** Causing inflammation and weakness in the muscles, this disease can affect the whole body and cause disability.
- **Psoriatic arthritis.** This form of arthritis occurs in some persons with psoriasis, a scaling skin disorder, affecting the joints at the ends of the fingers and toes. It can also cause changes in the fingernails and toenails. Back pain may occur if the spine is involved.
- **Bursitis.** This condition involves inflammation of the *bursae*, small, fluid-filled sacs that help reduce friction between bones and other moving structures in the joints. The inflammation may result from arthritis in the joint or injury or infection of the bursae. Bursitis produces pain and tenderness and may limit the movement of nearby joints.
- **Tendinitis.** Also called *tendonitis*, this condition refers to inflammation of tendons (tough cords of tissue that connect muscle to bone) caused by overuse, injury, or a rheumatic condition. Tendinitis produces pain and tenderness and may restrict movement of nearby joints.

## What causes arthritis?

For many types of arthritic diseases, no cause is known. Researchers are looking at possible causes for many of these diseases. With osteoarthritis, extreme stress on a joint may play a role in how this disease develops. Stress can be caused by weak cartilage (which runs in families) or from repeated injury to the joint. Biological make-up and family history may play a role in gout, rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, ankylosing spondylitis, and some other arthritic diseases.

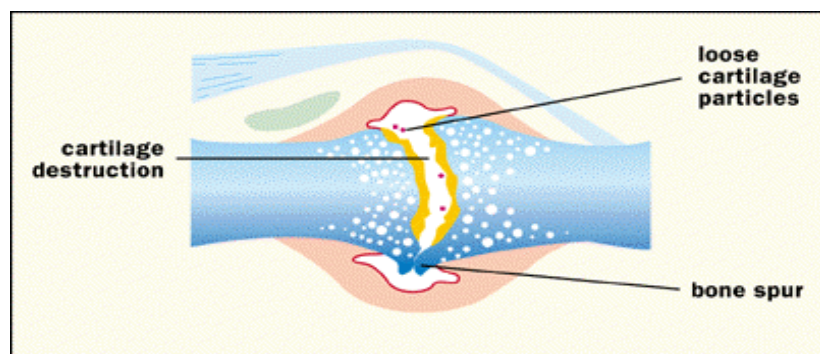
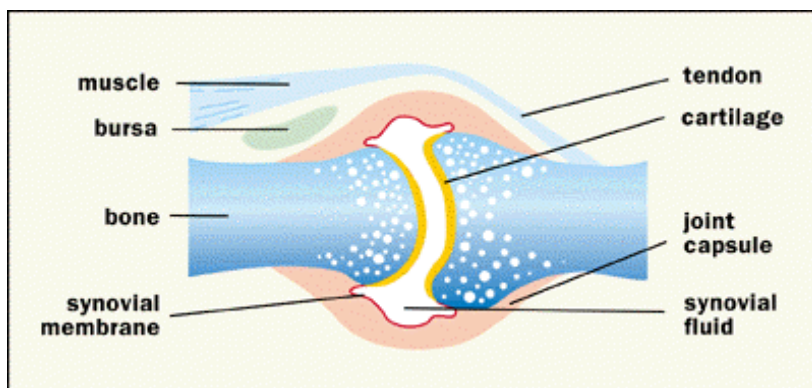
Researchers are also looking at why some people develop these diseases and others do not. Being overweight and aging appear to increase a person's chances of getting osteoarthritis. And, women are more likely than men to get lupus and rheumatoid arthritis.

## What does arthritis do to a person's joints?

Osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis – the two most common types of rheumatic diseases – affect a person's joints, causing discomfort and pain. The range of motion in a joint can lessen, making it harder for a person to perform daily activities. Sometimes the joint can lose all function (not be able to move).

### Normal Joint\*

In a normal joint (where two bones come together), the muscle, *bursa* (sacs of fluid that protect moving muscles, skin and tendons) and *tendons* (tissue that attaches muscle to bone) support the bone and help the joint to move. The *synovial membrane* releases a slippery fluid into the joint space. Cartilage covers the ends of the bone to absorb shocks and to keep the bones from rubbing together when the joint moves.

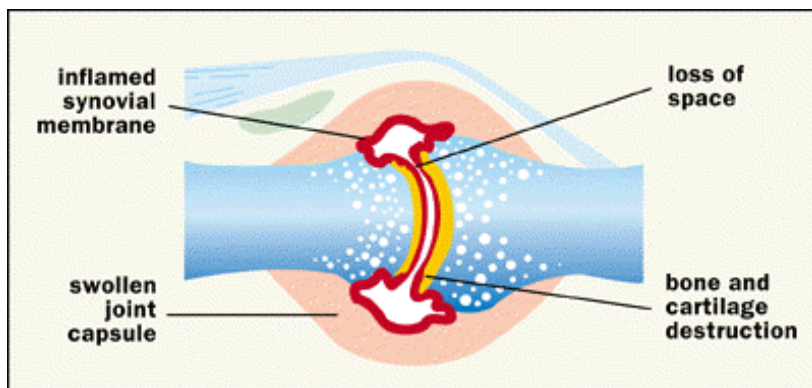


### Joint with Osteoarthritis\*

With osteoarthritis, cartilage breaks down and the bones rub together. The joint then loses shape and moves. The ends of the bone become thick, forming spurs (bony growths). Bits of cartilage or bone float in the joint space.

### Joint with Rheumatoid Arthritis\*

With rheumatoid arthritis, the joint becomes inflamed and the synovial membrane becomes thicker. This causes the joint to swell, causing damage to bone and cartilage. Over time, the bone and cartilage gets destroyed. Space between the joint gets smaller, and the joint loses shape and moves.



\*Source of Images: U. S. Food and Drug Administration.



## What are the symptoms of arthritis?

Different types of arthritis have different symptoms. In general, people who have arthritis feel pain and stiffness in the joints. Some other common symptoms of arthritis are:

- Swelling in one or more joints
- Stiffness around the joints that lasts for a least one hour in the early morning
- Joint pain or tenderness that is constant or comes and goes
- Feeling like it's hard to use or move a joint
- Warmth or redness in a joint

Sometimes a person can lose weight, feel weak, and have fevers or joint pain for no reason. See a health care provider if you have any one of these symptoms for longer than two weeks.

## How is arthritis diagnosed?

Diagnosing rheumatic diseases can be difficult because some symptoms are common to many different diseases. Your health care provider will first do a complete physical exam, looking for any swelling, redness, warmth, deformity, ease of movement, and tenderness in your joints. Your heart, lungs, eyes, ears, throat and other parts of your body may be examined as well. This is because some types of arthritis can affect your organs. Lab tests may also be ordered and samples of blood, urine, or synovial fluid may be taken. Your doctor may have you also see a *rheumatologist*, a doctor who specializes in arthritis.

## What are the treatments for arthritis?

Treatments for arthritis help to reduce pain and swelling in the joints, keep the joints moving, and keep the disease from getting worse. When you have arthritis, it is important to develop a good relationship with your health care provider. Together, you can develop a treatment plan that will work best for you.

Treatments include:

- Over-the-counter medicines like analgesics (aspirin), other nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, or NSAIDS (Advil, Motrin, Nuprin), and *acetaminophen* (Tylenol).
- Prescription drugs to relieve pain, such as *celecoxib* (Celebrex) and *refeoxib* (Vioxx).
- Over-the-counter creams and sprays for pain relief.
- Corticosteroids (*prednisone*, *cortisone*, *solumedrol*, *hydrocortisone*) to decrease inflammation and suppress the immune system (used for rheumatoid arthritis) taken by mouth, injection, or applied as creams to the skin.
- Applying heat or ice to reduce pain and inflammation.

- Daily exercise (without overdoing it) to keep the joints moving and strengthen the muscles around the joints. Rest is also needed for joints affected by arthritis. You will need to find the right type of exercise and the right amount of rest. Your doctor can send you to a physical therapist to help you with an exercise and rest program. Walking and swimming in a heated pool can help arthritis. Stretching and gentle yoga can also help maintain flexibility.
- Controlling or losing weight to reduce stress on joints.
- Hydrotherapy, or exercising (swimming, water aerobics) or relaxing in warm water (baths, hot tubs) to help relax tense muscles and relieve pain.
- Mobilization therapy, including traction (gentle, steady pulling), massage, and manipulation (using the hands to restore normal movement to stiff joints) to help control pain and increase joint motion and flexibility.
- Relaxation therapy, or learning ways to release muscle tension by yourself, such as progressive relaxation where you tighten muscle groups one by one, relaxing tension throughout your body.
- Assistive devices for treating arthritis pain include splints and braces, which are used to support weakened joints or allow them to rest. Some of these devices prevent the joint from moving; others allow some movement.
- Surgery to repair or replace damaged joints. Knees and hips, for example, can be replaced. A new, artificial knee or hip is put in your body to take the place of the damaged joint (in severe cases).
- Nutritional supplements are often reported as helpful in treating rheumatic diseases. These include products such as *S-adenosylmethionine* (SAM-e) for osteoarthritis and fibromyalgia, *dehydroepiandrosterone* (DHEA) for lupus, and *glucosamine* and *chondroitin sulfate* for osteoarthritis. Reports on the safety and effectiveness of these products should be viewed with caution since very few claims have been carefully evaluated.

**Note:** Be aware that there are many products you can buy that make lots of promises to cure arthritis, but don't. Some of these products, such as snake venom, are even harmful. While not harmful, other products like copper bracelets don't cure the disease or ease symptoms.

## What research is being done on arthritis?

Scientists are looking at new ways to treat rheumatoid arthritis. They are experimenting with new drugs and "biologic agents" that selectively block certain immune system activities associated with inflammation. Newly developed drugs include *etanercept* (Enbrel) and *infliximab* (Remicade).

Some genetic and behavioral studies are focusing on factors that may lead to osteoarthritis. Researchers recently found that daughters of women who have knee osteoarthritis have a significant increase in cartilage breakdown, making them more susceptible to disease. This finding has important implications for identifying people who are susceptible to osteoarthritis. Other studies of risk factors for osteoarthritis have identified excessive weight and lack of exercise as contributing factors to knee and hip disability.

# The National Women's Health Information Center (NWHIC)

A Project of the Office on Women's Health in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

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## For More Information...

You can find out more about Arthritis by contacting the National Women's Health Information Center at (800) 994-9662 or the following organizations:

### **National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases**

Phone Number(s): (301) 496-4484

Internet Address: <http://www.niams.nih.gov>

### **National Institute on Aging**

Phone Number(s): (800) 222-2225

Internet Address: <http://www.nih.gov/nia>

### **Arthritis National Research Foundation**

Phone Number(s): (800) 558-2873

Internet Address: <http://www.curearthritis.org>

### **American College of Rheumatology**

Phone Number(s): (404) 633-3777

Internet Address: <http://www.rheumatology.org>

### **Arthritis Foundation**

Phone Number(s): (800) 283-7800

Internet Address: <http://www.arthritis.org>

This FAQ was developed from arthritis fact sheets of the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases and the Food and Drug Administration.

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